

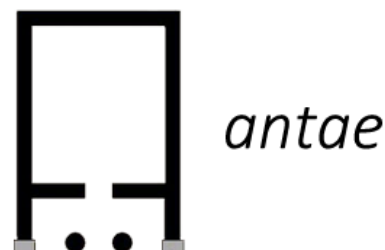
Relative Authenticity: Abstraction and the Digital Domain

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Relative Authenticity: Abstraction and the Digital Domain

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Introduction

This paper intends to offer a preliminary investigation of what will be referred to as the notion of *abstraction* in relation to Sigmund Freud's ideas of *condensation* and *displacement*, together with Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signification. Abstraction, then, shall be defined as one process through which a *signifier* is created. The argument shall aim to trace and retrace the cognitive process of abstraction by discussing its role across different facets and layers of contemporary society, with particular attention being paid to the effects of the digital on this role. Abstractions shall be discussed in terms of how they occur in principle and in practice, and how they might be perceived. This shall lead to a series of hypotheses concerning reflections and reactions which the omnipresence of the digital domain in everyday life might be prompting in contemporary society. The paper shall also focus on the parallel phenomena of *relative reality* and *relative authenticity*, which can be understood as the hypothetical middle ground or gradient existing between real and fake, and which shall be argued to be direct implications of abstraction.

Abstraction and Distance

To define the notion of abstraction as it will be used in this paper, particular reference needs to be made to aspects of the thought of Freud and de Saussure. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud speaks of the cerebral phenomenon of condensation, which refers to the distilling of many ideas, feelings, or concepts into one vision or representation.¹ He proposes that this concept is the process through which the mind processes *dream-content* (what actually happens in the dream experience) into *dream thoughts* (the compressed thoughts which the mind generates after the dream to represent the original content). Freud then proceeds to define displacement as the action through which one idea *moves* into (and essentially replaces or becomes) another. It can therefore be said that condensation is that which happens when multiple displacements allow for ideas to converge into one.

¹ See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010).

There is a similar process at work in de Saussure's theory of signs in terms of the representation of ideas.² De Saussure's *sign* refers to entities (such as words or objects) having a double identity composed of the *signified* and the *signifier*. In a linguistic context, the *signifier* would be the chosen word while the *signified* is the mental projection or abstract concept which the word is meant to refer to and/or represent. In this sense, one can observe that the word is seen as having a double identity in that it is identified by its physical components, or its phonetic and written structures, while at the same time representing an idea which is completely other from what the word is.

Much like in the case of Freud's condensation, the notion of abstraction presented by this paper refers to a kind of conceptual summary or abbreviation whose intent is to extract definite characteristics or information out of an entity (such as a human being, an idea or a material) and partially transfer or transpose its identity (information) onto a different entity. Regarding this matter, N. Katherine Hayles suggests that 'information is conceptually distinct from the markers that embody it'.³ This implies that information initially associated with an object or entity (the *signified*) may be abstracted from it and projected onto another entity (the *signifier*) which can then carry relational information which has the sole purpose of pointing toward another entity. The *signifier* is therefore seen to have acquired a *relative* identity since its identity is not entirely restricted to itself as a physical object and neither is it found entirely within the object or entity it is meant to signify. The identity falls somewhere in between.

By linking de Saussure's ideas to Freud's, one may contemplate the implications of Freud's concept of displacement over de Saussure's theory of signification. The notion of displacement inherently implies the existence of some distance separating the original idea from the new, compressed idea. It is in this context that the paper will argue that abstractions create mental distances which form between the nature of what is there to see (the *signifier*) and that of what is implied by it (the *signified*).

Just as distance is inherent to the Freudian concept of displacement, the process of abstraction also incites a sense of distance. When a subject constantly deals with or is in ceaseless touch with products of abstractions (*signifiers*), however, it may be argued that the subject's active cognitive awareness of the distance between the *signifier* and the *signified* dims down into a kind of half-reality. An analogy may be devised to better explain this process. If there exists distance between the *signifier* and the *signified*, one may liken the *signifier* to a zooming lens pointing toward its *signified* meaning or that which it represents. At first encounter or in sparse encounters with such lenses, the subject is thought to remain fairly actively aware that they are wearing the lenses. If at any point one were to ask the subject whether the object they are looking at exists at a distance or is close to them, it is highly probable that they will answer that the distance *does* exist. However, if one were to suddenly remove the lenses after having grown used to them, one

² See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1998).

³ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.25.

would still feel surprised at that same distance one had previously been aware of. This same kind of shock is here argued to translate into what is felt when one is suddenly made aware of how far they actually are from the signified meaning they had perceived to be so close.

This paper contends that the ensuing feeling upon acknowledging this distance is very often a sense of frustration. The fact that frustration often characterises some of our reactions when we interact with digital technology is, it shall be argued, a direct consequence of the chasm outlined above. Moreover, this frustration is not due to the fact that the subject is not *aware* of the distance, but that the subject is subconsciously deluded by the signifier (or, by analogy, the zooming lens) into a kind of half-reality. This sense of frustration consequently lies in the peculiar relationship between the dimming down of one's active awareness (the process which leads one to forget that there is distance) and that lingering sense of awareness that had previously allowed the subject to assert their knowledge of the distance involved.

The Digital Domain and the Interface

One can anticipate how well the role played by the digital domain in contemporary life can lend itself to a discussion of abstraction. However, the abstractions posed by the digital domain are slightly more complex than the ones mentioned so far. The first layer of abstraction is that common to all codes and languages: the ability of the binary code (the one common element to the entire digital spectrum) to condense auditory and visual information into sequences of ones (positive electric pulse) and zeros (no electric pulse). Thus one can understand the code sequence to be the signifier and the specific sound clip or image represented to be the signified. Even on this level, the relationship between signified and signifier is not as simple as other forms of abstractions shown in this paper. As Hayles puts it, 'in informatics, the signifier can no longer be understood as a single marker, for example an ink mark on a page. Rather it exists as a flexible chain of markers bound together by the arbitrary relations specified by the relevant codes,' up until the point where 'a signifier on one level becomes a signified on the next-higher level'.⁴ Hayles here refers to the intricate network of relationships between languages representing the subject entity which have to intermesh seamlessly for digital representation to take place. A large part of this process has the sole purpose of shielding the user of the system from its actual complex workings. Binary code, in fact, was not devised to be comprehended by human subjects but by computers. Therefore, a situation arises where another party is introduced: the interface.

In the case of a subject's relationship with any given machine, the interface is that mechanical or coded membrane with which the user is in contact: a membrane present between the user and the actual workings of a machine which enables them to control it without being directly in touch with how the device is actually doing what they want it to

⁴ Hayles, p.31.

do. The interface is then itself an additional abstract of those actual workings of a machine; the interface extracts elements from the machine's actual workings which interest the user and presents them in a manner that the user may comprehend.

It should also be noted that in this process, and over a considerable period of time, the user might develop a kind of subconscious, half-illusion—as with the lens analogy—that he or she has comprehended how the machine works because he or she knows how to make the machine function through its interface. A similar argument was put forward by Robert M. Pirsig in his philosophical novel, *Zen and the art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.⁵ In one passage involving a motorcycle road trip, Pirsig describes the difference between himself driving an older Honda, whose workings and maintenance he understood, and his travel partner driving a BMW motorcycle whose workings he did not comprehend. Pirsig argues that his partner's mental detachment from his machine caused him an irrational kind of frustration. In the context of the argument posed in this paper, it might be hypothesized that what might have caused the frustration was not the fact that Pirsig's travel partner did not know how his machine worked, but the fact that the driving interface, which he could control, gave him the subconscious illusion of knowledge through being in control.

The lens analogy applies once again here and its implications are amplified by the fact that the number of gadgets that are used as an integral part of day-to-day living, and which are functioned through an interface, has grown considerably and is still growing. The higher the availability of these gadgets, the longer the duration of the time we spend dealing with their interfaces. The intensification of abstraction is also directly proportional to this. Whereas older, mechanical machines required physical effort to function because of their rudimentary interfaces (the physicality of the mechanical interface relating directly to that of the machine's workings), today's digital touch-screens are abolishing even the basic physical connection of pushing material buttons. The conceptual difference between how the user-interface functions and how the machine works, the distance between the projected 'surface' and the internal workings, is consequently growing ever larger. In this manner, the user is subconsciously made to feel more distant from that which he is dealing with for extended periods of time during his day. Jean Baudrillard captures this sense of detachment from machines in the following quotation: 'The Mischievous Spirit watches and waits behind all artifacts, and of all our artificial products we could say what Canetti said of animals: "Behind each of them, one has the impression that someone human is hidden, sniggering at us."' ⁶ Baudrillard's description gives the impression that some other form of intelligence is held hostage within the machine, behind what appears to be the machine's deceiving surface, and at a distance from whatever the user is trying to use the machine for.⁷

⁵ Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (London: Random House, 1991).

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, 'Paroxysm – The Perfect Crime', *The European Graduate School* (1995) <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/paroxysm-the-perfect-crime/>> [accessed 8 December 2014]

⁷ The suggested implications of the phrase, 'deceiving surface', will be addressed later on.

Materiality and Information

The definition of abstraction and the discussion of the interface have thus far gestured towards the distinction between material objects and the information which they carry or signify. In her discussion about 'presence and absence'—hereby taken to refer to the material world—versus 'pattern and randomness'—hereby taken to refer to the world of information—Hayles says that '[information] is a pattern rather than a presence, defined by the probability distribution of the coding elements composing the message'.⁸ Throughout her writing, Hayles passionately displays the limitations of the notion of presence and absence when compared to pattern and randomness. Since abstraction is a process through which information is extracted from entities, information is, at least on a temporal scale, strictly secondary to the object's material nature. Taking her cue from William Gibson's 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, Hayles conversely argues that 'Information is the putative origin, physicality the derivative manifestation'.⁹ This leads her to ask: 'If flesh is data incarnate, why not go back to the source and leave the perils of physicality behind?'¹⁰ This forms a large part of her definition of where humanity is (and perhaps should be) heading. She goes on to assert that 'In a world despoiled by overdevelopment, overpopulation, and time-release environmental poisons, it is comforting to think that physical forms can recover their pristine purity by being reconstituted as informational patterns in a multidimensional computer space'.¹¹ Across society, in fact, this seems to be an ever more dominant train of thought: prioritising the information abstracted from an entity over the entity itself—without which, arguably, the information would not have existed in the first place. A prevalent example is that of the various instances in which the same information is transplanted onto a number of other material 'bodies' such that it fits into larger marketing and mass production schemes, as witnessed in the example of faux materials.

At this stage, one begins to question just how complete an abstraction can be, and to which extent information may describe material entities. In order for information to completely replace material reality with respect to the human being as a perceiving entity, it needs to incorporate within it the *whole* spectrum of qualities and characteristics perceivable by the human senses. The mechanics and parameters of sensorial perception therefore come into play. This implies that the chosen form of the data (binary in the case of digital informatics) needs to somehow embody such parameters *entirely*. Taking into account the multi-layered and intricate nature of human sensorial perception modes (in the way that each of the senses works and the way they are processed and inter-related within the brain), one might question whether a code such as binary (which is rather rudimentary) could take up such an imposing task.

⁸ Hayles, p.25.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.37.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Hayles, p.36.

The depth and complexities involved in human sensorial perception is profoundly addressed by Juhani Pallasmaa in his novel, *The Eyes of the Skin*. Pallasmaa here speaks about the role of and the relationship between the human senses in the perception of space and surroundings in an architectural context. Pallasmaa argues mostly in praise of the sense of touch and how much the human mind relies on it to mould spatial perception. He argues that ‘buildings have turned into image products detached from existential depth and sincerity’.¹² The argument goes on to attribute this shortcoming to ‘the current over-emphasis on the intellectual and conceptual dimensions of architecture [which] contributes to the disappearance of its physical, sensual and embodied essence’.¹³ The digitization of the design process in architecture has largely aided and paved the way for its intellectualization from the concept stage through to the actual building, reflecting the above-mentioned prioritisation of the information extracted from objects over their actual material nature. The intellectual abstraction involved in having a virtual three-dimensional model of a building and using it as the major tool to shape and design implies an array of subtle changes in the way buildings (together with the majority of design objects) are conceived and designed.

A fairly elementary example is the approach to construction materials, which is Pallasmaa’s main contention. The same theme is encountered in which, as a result of abstraction, what constitutes or lies within a material entity is conceptually set apart from that which covers it and lends it appearance. In this case, it is common practice when building a digital three-dimensional model which will eventually represent a physical building, to start by creating abstract surfaces, that is, surfaces with no physical or material properties. Textures are subsequently assigned to the abstract surfaces. This conceptual distinction should be here deemed as very profound and one which testifies to and echoes the argument at hand: the physicality of the material becomes but a mere surface to yield impressions and illusions. This is a literal manifestation of the term superficiality: matter being abstracted down to a texture, which is then applied to a surface.

Truth to Material and the Deceiving Surface

To see abstract images as somehow in the way of the truth of the landscape says something about the powerful suspicion of surface as a veil behind which ‘real’ meaning hides. Is it really possible to block out the formal properties of the surface—as enemy of truth—while the buried significance is excavated by close reading?¹⁴

¹² Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (New York, NY: Academy Press, 2005), p.30.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.32.

¹⁴ John Beck, ‘Strangers to the Stars: Abstraction, Aeriality, Aspect Perception’, in John Armitage and Ryan Bishop, eds., *Virilio and Visual Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp.46-68 (pp.49-50).

John Beck's quotation demonstrates that surface does not fare well, at least critically, in the dichotomy between tangible materiality and superficial surfaces. He goes so far as to call surface the 'enemy of truth'. Less drastically, one may venture to speak of a 'deceiving surface', with this being a common element in, as well as a core part of, many of the abstractions tackled in this paper.

In architecture, theorists such as John Ruskin, Augustus Pugin, and William Morris have described the value of 'truth to material', among other things, as being that characteristic pertaining to a building or created object whose constituent materials are used to show nothing other than what they are. This has been perhaps best crystallised by Ruskin in 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' (first published in 1849), where one of the so-called lamps is tellingly the 'lamp of truth'.¹⁵ Ruskin here explains what deception is, how to recognise it in objects of art, and how to learn to appreciate its absence. He professes the righteousness of Gothic architecture, where a building completely exposes itself for what it is: a large-scale enclosure made out of stone (left bare) which covers an internal void by understanding and using wisely the inherent structural qualities of its material to an elegant extreme. This is opposed to the approach of constructing a structure in a particular material and having it covered with another; separating the way it works (or the way it sustains itself) from the way it appears. A practical example of this is having what looks like a masonry bridge uninterruptedly spanning a considerable length. Since stone is typically not structurally able to span long distances, the bridge would probably be constructed in reinforced concrete, then covered with blocks of stone. The bridge is ultimately deceiving the viewer into thinking that it is something which it is not.¹⁶ A deceiving surface is, then, that kind of surface which covers an object such that the object looks as if it holds within it something other than what it actually does.

This surface-oriented attitude is mirrored in other senses. One such example is that of taste and smell, whereby one may observe the process of abstraction in how certain food products are designed to taste and smell like something other than that which they are. The flavour of the original food product can be said to be the surface abstracted and applied to another edible substance. The deceiving surface is therefore that element, embedded in an object, which is designed to give some degree of illusion that the object at hand is something other than what it actually is: that it actually is a signifier pointing toward something else. Taking his cue from Baudrillard's discussion on virtuality, Slavoj Žižek writes:

Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance—in the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like the real coffee without being the real one, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being one. Is this not the attitude of today's hedonistic Last

¹⁵ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1989).

¹⁶ One might here relate this to the case of machines and devices; the often smooth and lush nature of their packaging covers and surfaces is opposed to how the machine looks within as soon as the surface is pierced.

Man? Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, BUT deprived of its substance which makes it dangerous.¹⁷

Industry at large seems to be increasingly concerned with mass-manufacturing products which are designed to look and sometimes feel like other objects (mostly found in nature) which they are meant to represent. Žižek argues that what pushes society into this territory is something which identifies the current epoch: instead of *not* consuming or consuming *less* of an overly expensive or potentially harmful product, society finds ways of making broad consumption possible by abstracting selected characteristics from the said product and replacing everything else about it. Žižek provides various glaring examples, such as ‘coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol...’¹⁸ One should also note that among such synthetic products, different levels of illusion exist: one may have fruit juices, for example, which are more natural or real than others. For this reason, one may speak of a relative authenticity or of varying degrees of reality: a vague middle ground containing a gradient between that which is authentic and that which is not.

The idea of faux materials in architectural design is one very apt example of this. The use of faux materials normally involves attaching a synthetic surface—which studiously resembles some other material—to a cheaper block of material. This process tellingly parallels the three-dimensional modelling discussed above. Perhaps the most popular material to be synthesised is timber in its various families and species. We may here observe the gradient of relative authenticity taking place as regards timber, whereby one finds in the market wood products that are more real than others because of differing techniques of production. As an example, consider the difference between having a high-quality digital print of a piece of wood printed over another piece of material, as opposed to having actual thin surface plates of timber being stuck over another material. There are numerous examples of such materials, from faux marble to faux animal fur in the clothing industry.

Digitisation and Architecture Design

The role of the surface is an important one even in describing the effect which the digital era seems to be having on architectural design. In fact, another example of how three-dimensional model-generating software may be argued to have changed the way objects and buildings are designed, can be visually witnessed in some growing stylistic trends within contemporary architecture. Producing an abstract entity, such as a three-dimensional model with its own virtual digital aesthetic, seems to have pushed, over the years, toward a physical aesthetic wherein the architect tries to make their finished building faithfully represent that which was made on the digital platform. Such are the buildings against which Pallasmaa argues feverishly; buildings which look and feel as if they have been made to represent, as rigorously as possible, the model which had been

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, ‘A Cup of Decaf Reality’, *LacanDotCom* (2004) <www.lacan.com/zizekdecaf.htm> [accessed on 29 November 2014]

¹⁸ Žižek, ‘A Cup of Decaf Reality’.

initially produced to represent them. One such example is the UNStudio's Theatre Agora (shown below) in the Netherlands. Its interior leaves the viewer perplexed as to whether it is a virtual or a real space, owing to the complete abolition of any recognisable material in favour of abstract red surfaces whose distorted geometries it owes, fairly exclusively, to the digital domain.



Figure 1: UNStudio, 'Theatre Agora'¹⁹

¹⁹ Christian Richters, 'Theatre Agora', *UNStudio* (2007) <<http://www.unstudio.com/projects/theatre-agora>> [accessed 20 November 2014]

At this stage, it is worth summoning the thought of Marshall McLuhan about tools being ‘extensions’ of the human body.²⁰ McLuhan argues that it is not unusual that, while at the same time they are ‘extending’ human possibilities, such tools might effectively be ‘amputating’ other human abilities. Such an adverse effect might need time to become manifest and McLuhan insists that as technologies develop at steep rates, it becomes harder and harder to maintain active awareness of the background side-effects which many day-to-day tools might be having on human abilities. This logic can be applied to most examples which are mentioned throughout the paper. One may observe, for example, how the architectural modelling software that enabled the design of something like Theatre Agora can be said to expand our human ability to imagine and swiftly share detailed architectural visions. However, it can be argued that this comes at a cost; that same software amputates the user’s sensibility toward the material dimension that the user is experiencing and places the user at a larger conceptual distance from the material product.



Figure 2: MVRDV, ‘Glass Farm’²¹

A more specific case study is the work of MVRDV studio, also from the Netherlands. Across their thick portfolio, one can identify a wistfully experimental approach toward the philosophical roles of matter and the material dimension of architecture. In a project called ‘Glass Farm’ (shown above), realized between 2008 and 2013 in Schijndel, Netherlands, the firm presents a shop and office complex composed entirely out of glass in its external shell. The distinguishing feature is that printed on the glass surfaces are compiled textures

²⁰ See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, NY: Mentor, 1964).

²¹ Persbureau van Eindhoven and Jeroen Musch, ‘Glass Farm / MVRDV’, *ArchDaily* (2013) <<http://www.archdaily.com/321503/glass-farm-mvrdv-2/>> [accessed 20 November 2014]

from photographs of traditional local farmhouses by artist Frank van der Salm. A fritting technique was then applied by architects to print the images straight onto the glass and effectively create the illusion from a distance that the building is composed of brick walls and a thatched roof. The building is therefore intrinsically a product of the digital age, both in its physicality (the prints were done digitally) and in its conception.

Sensory Signal In/Coherencies

Having a material pretending to be another brings about a kind of incoherency to the human senses. Where one associates, for example, a certain kind of texture and odour with a particular material, in the case of the 'Glass Farm', one may find something which looks like wood but feels cold and smooth like glass. The individual elements constituting the sensorial input (texture and odour) may be argued to be giving *contrasting* signals about the same material. Delving deeper into the issue of material perception, Pallasmaa frequently discusses the importance of the relationship between the senses and the information they provide. He argues that there is virtue and inherent comfort in harmony among sensory signals: to look at a piece of timber across the room, move towards it to reach it, touch it with one's fingertips, smell it and understand in one's mind that it is just that which it looks like, a piece of wood.

Pallasmaa's thought, however, cannot be so easily applied across the whole spectrum of sensorial perception. Consider the virtual realm as an example: here, the issue of material perception and presence loses its ground and changes the dimensions of the harmonious relationship Pallasmaa values between the senses and the information they provide. Hayles can be re-summoned owing to her thoughts regarding the issues of presence. She says that in the case of a 'real person' accessing virtual reality (as an avatar), 'Questions about presence and absence do not yield much leverage [...] for the avatar both is and is not present, just as the user both is and is not inside the screen'.²² Conversely, there is a similar logic at work in the case of televisions, where the entities projected by the television both are and 'are not' present in the room. It may be argued that over long periods of time (as is usual for a person watching programmes on television), there comes a point where one's cognitive mind is numbed down and becomes absorbed by the representations projected, enough to set aside what is actually physically happening and start deluding their sensorial perception subconsciously. One starts, over time, attributing a strange tinge of unprecedented relative reality to the representations on the screen and through the speakers which is unlike an entirely real perception, since if the viewer is asked at any point whether the person on the screen is actually in the room, the answer is likely to be in the negative.

The digital dimension has taken this issue to a whole new level, especially when one considers the vast types and sizes of digital (and digitally printed) screens which invade everyday life. The amount of screens surrounding the average city resident—from

²² Hayles, p.27.

television sets, mobile phones, and touch-sensitive pads, to billboards, logos, shop displays, and car dashboard indications—has grown to such an extent that it is starting to take considerable effort for the mind to sieve through and be constantly and thoroughly aware of what is actually happening before the eye in strictly physical terms. For example, it is highly unlikely for someone walking through a shopping mall to be constantly and entirely aware that the screen he or she is looking at is actually an intricate array of minute flickering LED lights and that the logo or face which it displays is merely a specific combination of flickers. Given enough time, one might start perceiving images at face (or surface) value, stopping at the most immediate perception: the illusion. This is especially so when one takes into account the effort and resources invested in branding, marketing and advertisement campaigns to study human perception and tailor-produce the most eye-catching, easy-to-follow and manipulative image or videos for advertisements. Digitisation has therefore not only widened the chasm mentioned earlier between what really is and what appears to be in physical terms, but it has also increased the frequency of exposure to such issues in an extremely drastic manner over a remarkably brief period of time.

It is precisely due to the world of marketing that there unfolds another effect of the digital age over architectural design. The on-going trend of software conglomeration (linking and moulding programs to and into one another, creating hybrid programs) is providing links between three-dimensional software and graphic design software. What this implies is that, since so much of design architecture and graphic design revolve around the digital tool (programme) at hand, the merging of the programmes implies the partial merge of the professions. This partially explains why such a strong branding and marketing or graphic design element has infiltrated the world of architecture.

Ultimately, the digital representation of a given project can be seen to start taking precedence and priority over whatever physical derivative it might have been intended to have. By consequence, one might observe a graphic/image-centric approach to designing, through which buildings are designed exclusively for the way they lend themselves to portrayals on posters and graphics spread across online platforms or magazines, gaining instant worldwide exposure. The driving notions behind such buildings are therefore required to be, as well, suited to their digital platform: abstract, short and intensely summarised. If possible, the building needs to be designed to be definable by one single image which should be able to deliver and describe it completely. This is effectively driving the architectural and design scene to adopt a limited range of vague (or more tellingly, abstract) and effect-driven buzzwords to best describe and advertise their virtual builds online for competitions or for magazines. Examples of such terms and phrases are ‘sustainable’, ‘recycled materials’, ‘green’, ‘blurring lines/boundaries between spaces’, and so on.

Furthermore, in the rare cases where such projects get realized (the digital domain having drastically increased the number of projects which remain virtual), what happens is that the resulting buildings carry with them those vague abstractions: they still feel like they have

been designed exclusively to provide visually imposing images made out of textured surfaces laden with overtones of a faux and abstract heart.

It may therefore be argued that digitisation, once more through abstraction, is effectively forcing architectural designers to increasingly devise marketing campaigns instead of buildings. The majority of examples which this paper has put forward can be seen to indicate that marketing and mass media are the most powerful motive behind contemporary abstraction. This is, of course, no news for any contemporary individual living in developed countries since one can hardly ignore the invasive nature marketing and advertisement have acquired. As Baudrillard puts it:

The aura of our world is no longer sacred—no longer the numinous horizon of appearances—but one of absolute merchandise. Its essence is advertising. At the heart of our universe of signs is a mischievous ad-man genie of publicity, a trickster, who has integrated the buffoonery of merchandising with its staging. A brilliant scenographer has lured the world into a phantasmagoria of which we are all the fascinated victims.²³

An underlying calm

The appeal of abstraction, however, does not rely solely on the advantages it offers for the purposes of marketing and advertising. More generally, one other motivation behind the creation of abstractions may in fact be that of numbing, to a certain extent, the human mind: having the subject deal with simplified or summarised versions of an object or idea which feel closer, such that a lesser degree of active mental effort is required to perpetuate day-to-day life with an underlying sense of calm. The potentially adverse effect of this whole framework of processes is that when signifiers start invading mundane life to great extents, a situation is created in which one starts feeling like one is looking at *everything* through zooming lenses (as per the lens analogy). The individual might thus feel that he or she is growing ever more distant from the world he or she is living in.

This closely relates to what George Monbiot argues in his famed article, 'The age of loneliness is killing us'.²⁴ Throughout the article, Monbiot steadily builds the idea that loneliness might actually be the single distinguishing factor of the age we live in. In relation to the argument presented in this paper, one might extrapolate the hypothesis that the distance which exists between the signified and the signifier, amplified in recent years by industry and the digital domain, might be a key factor in the configuration of this loneliness. The accumulation of so many abstractions around ordinary day-to-day life might be yielding to an accumulation of distances which the subject perceives in relation to the reality around him or her. Such accumulation might be contributing to this unprecedented degree of experienced isolation.

²³ Baudrillard, (par.30 of 45)

²⁴ George Monbiot, 'The age of loneliness is killing us', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2014
<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us>> [accessed on 24 November 2014]

Another passage in Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is relevant here. At one point, Pirsig describes a situation involving a leaky faucet in a small family household. No one in the house does anything about it, but the atmosphere in the house gradually grows uncomfortable until the mother (who spends most of her time at home) ends up becoming increasingly irritable toward her children. This may serve as an example of how, upon closer inspection, we may suggest that it is often the mindless accumulation of smaller background frustrations—rather than the foreground frustrations in one's life—which have the deeper effect on one's habitual state of mind. The tensions and frustrations which are mentioned in this paper, in most part, are argued to be of this kind. They are not frustrations which occupy some kind of foreground in one's psyche. It seems as though, in order to maintain an underlying calm, the human mind is naturally inclined toward swiping such background frustrations below some kind of carpet over which the subject then needs to balance himself in everyday life. Such tensions gather at the crevices of the thinking head and might lead to outbursts, possibly triggered by one trivial happening, of psychological ill-being. When one unknowingly hides enough things beneath the carpet, it becomes ever tougher to stand and walk on it, until something needs to happen for the accumulation underneath the carpet to be cleared out. Although one could, of course, acquire a thicker carpet.

Although we speak of the digital age, we could also legitimately speak of the digital age and its discontents. It feels as though, to a certain degree, people regard the digital age as an unwelcome guest. One such example of this is the way some of us might protest against and oppose the aesthetic of the digital age. This points toward the recent pervading trend among the younger generation feeling that they do not belong to this day and age, betraying a sense of detachment and estrangement from one's own epoch and resulting in an increased affinity with pre-digital culture. Numerous publications have emerged portraying such tendencies. Simon Reynolds's *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* is perhaps the most exemplary of such publications.²⁵ It argues precisely that the contemporary fascination with past cultural artefacts is unprecedented in terms of its obsessive nature, even when considering that different eras over time had always invoked other cultural precedents.

Reynolds's observation might be demonstrated by the present tendency of electronic music artists and audiences alike to prefer older analogue sounds to digital ones. This has pushed leading digital audio equipment manufacturers as far as seeking ways to digitally emulate analogue sounds and processes in their software and hardware, paradoxically creating digital abstractions and representations of analogue workings. The demand for pre-digital equipment has made older hardware (in some instances, not too old) much more expensive than what they actually cost in their own time. This trait similarly pervades the visual domain. In photography and imaging, as in the case of sound, one may observe a throwback toward the pre-digital age with the resurrection of analogue or film photography, as well as the programming of highly popular pieces of software containing

²⁵ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

filters designed to make digital photographs look like they were shot on film decades before. This may be catalogued as yet another case of abstraction whereby the textural characteristics of analogue images are transposed onto digital algorithms applicable to any given digital image.

The return to older artefacts in our time seems to instil a sense of deeper authenticity, and this reaction might be stemming from a general discontent with the aforementioned deceptions which the digital age has so intensely propelled. Such recurring illusions lead toward a wide discourse of what authenticity is and what things really are. The present paper has had to limit itself to simply laying the groundwork for what would be a lengthy discussion on the relationship between the digital and the notion of authenticity. It will have to suffice for now to point out that further elaboration on the notion of abstraction in relation to the digital age necessitates a revision of the dichotomy that posits surface and deception on one end of the spectrum, and authenticity on another. In anticipation of this, it is worth noting that this paper was not intended to preach in favour of a complete eradication of the deceptions described. To live without any sense of illusion is not only impossibly utopic, but potentially undesirable. A more practical approach would involve an increasing awareness of what one perceives in an attempt to intelligently curate and sieve the dust before swiping it neatly beneath the carpet.

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